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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Association of the Lady and the Unicorn, and the Hunting Mythology of the Caucasus

*David Hunt*

## *Abstract*

Written evidence from the hunting folk literature of the Caucasus is presented together with the suggestion that the origin of the unicorn lies in hunting mythology and that remnants of it are to be seen in the figures in "The Lady and the Unicorn" tapestries in France.

## *Introduction*

This paper discusses the association between the figures of the lady and the unicorn, particularly in light of records of survivals of the cult of a hunting goddess in the Caucasus Mountains. The hunter might be considered as a subsidiary figure in this association. The basic argument of the paper will incorporate the following.

- Classical descriptions of the unicorn; nearly all refer to hunting and often to mountains. In high mountainous areas of Europe and the near East, the most important prey animal for hunters is typically a goat, ibex or chamois (in the lower forested areas, it is often a deer).
- Ancient depictions of the unicorn usually show an animal with many goat-like characteristics.
- In all hunting cultures there is an owner; sometimes a master, but more often a mistress of the beasts.
- Stories of the owner of the beasts have faded from Western Europe but still exist in the Caucasus Mountains, where the owner's special animals have some characteristics in common with the legendary unicorn.
- There are a few recorded remnants in Western Europe, where there is a divergence of traditions associating the lady and the beasts. These two traditions are epitomised in the contrast between two famous sets of tapestries that were each woven c. 1500 A.D. and known as "The Lady and the Unicorn." In one set, now housed in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, the lady is a virgin whom the hunters appear to use purely as bait to lure the wild unicorn to her lap so that it can be captured or killed (Freeman 1976). In the other set, held by the Musée National du Moyen Age in Paris, the lady appears to own or control both the unicorn and a large feline animal, which is usually identified as a lion. In this latter set of tapestries, she is clearly in a position of authority relative to her animals, and there is no sign of a hunter.

This paper combines some of the evidence, especially from the Caucasus

Mountains, to suggest that the unicorn legend has its origins in ancient hunting mythology, which has almost disappeared from most of Europe, but has survived in the Caucasus Mountains.

### *Some Classical Descriptions of the Unicorn*

Quite understandably, none of the writers who described the unicorn had actually seen one; they relied on second-hand information, verbal or pictorial.

- One of the earliest descriptions is by Ctesias, about 400 B.C.. After a detailed description of the animal "as large as a horse," and with a white body and a single horn of one cubit (about 50 cm) in length, he described in detail how they can be hunted. He stressed the extreme speed and strength of the unicorn, and that it cannot be taken alive by hunters. He placed this animal in India (Ctesias 1947, 80–2).
- A unicorn is mentioned in the Bible (*Daniel* 8:5–7 and 21).
- Aristotle (384–22 B.C.) gave a brief description of two animals, one with a cloven hoof and one with a solid hoof (Aristotle 1965, 221). Here it is described as "a he-goat [who] came from the west, skimming over the whole earth without touching the ground; it had a prominent horn between its eyes."
- Julius Caesar (102–44 B.C.) described an "ox, shaped like a stag," with a single tall, straight horn, which sticks up higher and straighter than those of the animals we know, and it lived in the Hercynian Forest in Germany (Caesar 1951, 37).
- Pliny (23–79 A.D.) depicted an animal "with a body like a horse, head like a stag, feet like an elephant and tail like a boar ... one black horn two cubits long projects from the middle of its forehead." "This animal cannot be taken alive" (Pliny 1956, 57).
- Aelian (170–235 A.D.) stated that "in certain regions of India ... they say that there are impassable mountains full of wild life ... in these same regions there is said to exist a one-horned beast." The horn "is not smooth but has spirals of quite natural growth. It likes lonely grazing grounds where it roams in solitude ... nobody remembers a full-grown animal having been captured" (Aelian 1958–59, 289 ff).
- In the *Physiologus*, written by an anonymous writer between the second and fourth century A.D., there is a description of the unicorn: "He is a small animal, like a kid, but exceedingly fierce, with one horn in the middle of the head; and no hunter is able to capture him ... he has a beard and the cloven hooves of a goat." There follows a description of his capture by using a maiden's lap as bait (see Freeman 1976, 19).
- Cosmas (c. 550 A.D.) drew a picture of a unicorn based on some bronze statues that he had seen in Ethiopia. This showed an animal that was quite large compared with the hunter aiming his arrow at him, about the size of a deer or goat, with short ears, an upright horn and a beard, with claw-like feet (McCrindle 1897, 360–1).
- Somewhat later, Marco Polo (1254–1324 A.D.) gave a description of an animal that can be identified as the Indian rhinoceros. This animal is clearly different from the traditional form of the unicorn (Polo 1903, 285).

In these early accounts, Marco Polo excepted, the descriptions are so vague that it is difficult to come to any general conclusion about what might be the nearest animal relative of the unicorn or what its habits were supposed to have been. Generally, as well as having the single horn, the animal was said to reside in "the East," possibly in the mountains; the one common theme was that it cannot be captured by hunters.

### *Some Examples of Artistic Representations of Unicorns, Sometimes with Ladies*

Figure 1 below shows one of the earliest portrayals of a unicorn. Here it is playing a board game in Egypt with a lion. The unicorn has the form of an ibex.

Figure 2 overleaf, a bronze finial from Luristan, shows a lady supporting an ibex. Luristan is a mountainous district of Western Persia, and is situated about 900 km from the Caucasus Mountains. From graves in this region, large numbers, probably hundreds, of bronzes have been recovered, depicting various animal motifs, and often with the "mistress of the animals" or "master of the animals." These portray a male or female figure with prey animals or predators. Many of these bronzes have been dated to 850–650 B.C.

Figure 3 overleaf depicts another bronze finial from Luristan, showing two ibexes and two predatory animals conventionally taken to be lions but possibly dogs. Many of the bronzes portray hunting motifs, with prey animals being attacked by dogs or wild animals. The commentary in the book describing the Ashmolean Museum Collection states that:

if the iconography [of these finials] is difficult to describe, it is virtually impossible to explain with existing evidence. The great variety of interpretations advanced in the past forty years only serve to emphasize the problem (Moorey 1971, 154).

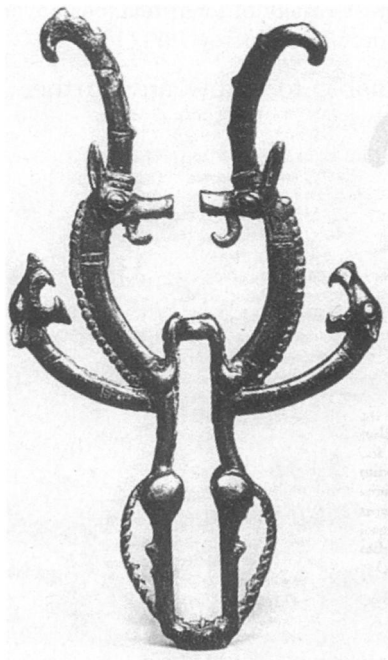
A Georgian expert was unable to throw any further light on this subject [1].



Figure 1 Detail from the Satirical Papyrus, 1305–1170 BC. Collection ref. AES 10016. Courtesy of the trustees of the British Museum, London.



*Figure 2* Bronze finial from Luristan. Collection Foroughi, Tehran. Photograph by Eileen Tweedy. Reproduced by permission of Thames and Hudson, London.



*Figure 3* Bronze finial from Luristan. Catalogue No. 1965.194. Reproduced by permission of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Figure 4 Bronze buckle, Old Hellenic Period, found in Racha, Georgia. State Historical Museum, Moscow. Inventory 54321, Collection of P. Uvarova.

Figure 4 above shows a bronze buckle from the Caucasus Mountains, from the Old Hellenic Period, found in Racha, Georgia, exact date unknown. There is a noticeable similarity of style between some of the finials and this buckle. The buckle shows a lady sitting on a two-headed deer, accompanied by serpents and a dog (Khidasheli 1972, 67). The similarity between the two styles raises the question whether there were trade and cultural connections between the two mountainous areas, where the conditions of hunting might have been similar to each other.

Figures 5 and 6 overleaf show examples of unicorns in Western European art. Figure 5 is a miniature in an English bestiary of the thirteenth century. Figure 6 is "A mon seul désir" from the "Lady and the Unicorn" tapestries in the Musée National du Moyen Age, Paris. In the Western European depictions, the animal is white with cloven hoofs and is of a size nearer to a goat than to a horse. In Figure 5 it has a beard. Both have one spirally marked horn.

To these few examples may be added many more illustrations of "The Lady and the Unicorn" from Western Europe, several of which have been overlaid with a Christian message (for example, see Gotfredsen 1999). Most of them show an animal with cloven hoofs and a beard like a goat, or sometimes a mane like a horse. It is always white and is usually a little larger than a normal goat but smaller than a normal horse. The horn is usually straight, but not always—in some older portrayals it is curved. Sometimes the surface of the horn is smooth, but in others it has spiral or transverse grooves. It may be noted that the East Caucasian or Daghestan *tur* (*Capra cylindricornis*) and the Kuban or West

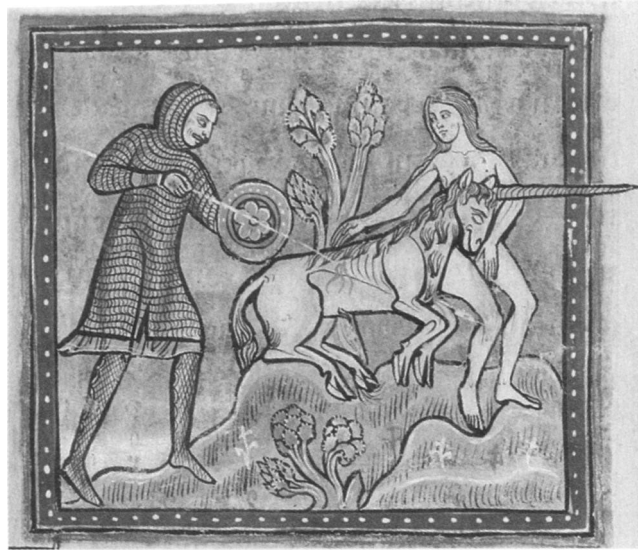


Figure 5 Miniature in English bestiary, thirteenth century. Roy.12.F.XIII.f.10v. Reproduced by permission of the British Library, London.



Figure 6 "A mon seul désir" from the tapestries "The Lady and the Unicorn" at the Musée National du Moyen Age, Paris. Reproduced by permission of the Director of the Musée National du Moyen Age.



Figure 7 Etruscan vase, sixth century BC. Inventory No. 4209. Reproduced by permission of the Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana, Firenze.

Caucasian *tur* (*Capra* [ibex] *caucasica*) both have transverse-grooved horns (Shackleton 1997, 183–5). The former also has long hair on the back of its neck, in the same place as the mane of a horse but shorter. The ibex on the Luristan bronzes is usually portrayed in profile, sometimes clearly with two horns, although sometimes the profile view makes it appear as if there is only one, like a unicorn.

### *The Owner of the Animals*

A comparison of Figures 5 and 6 shows that, whereas the lady plays a completely passive role in Figure 5 [2], in Figure 6 she is active, controlling both predator and prey animals, which have adopted a passive role relative to her. The former view is familiar from Christian symbolism, where the passive virgin is a metaphor for the Virgin Mary, and the male unicorn who occupies the virgin's lap is a metaphor for Christ. The latter type of representation, however, was part of hunting culture that saw the lady as the "owner of the animals."

On an Etruscan vase of the sixth century B.C. (Figure 7 above), the lady is holding a member of the cat family and a deer. Such an image suggests that the lady or goddess controls both the predatory and the prey animals. If a unicorn is



considered to be a prey animal, the lady in the French tapestry (Figure 6) also appears to be controlling a predator and prey animal, a lion and a unicorn.

In his preface to *The Supernatural Owners of Nature*, Ake Hultkrantz states that:

the owner (or master, lord, ruler, guardian) rules over a certain region and over a certain animal species. As soon as man sets foot upon and exploits this region or hunts these animals, he risks feuding with the owner unless contact with the latter is established before or after the encroachment (Hultkrantz 1961, 7 and 58).

The lady mounted on the two-headed deer, depicted on the bronze buckle from the Old Hellenic period (Figure 4), shows that the association of a lady with a hunting-prey animal is very ancient in the Caucasus, going back to well before the Christian era. The example may also be mentioned of the Trialeti Cup found in Eastern Georgia, and dated to the eighteenth to seventeenth centuries B.C. This depicts a seated lady with an animal head, in front of whom are two animals that appear to be awaiting sacrifice. Around the cup is a procession of human figures with animal heads and tails holding pitchers, and below is a procession of male and female deer.

In traditional Caucasus hunting lore, the beasts were owned by a goddess (although she was later supplanted by a god, and still later by St George, as we shall see). She was prepared to allow a certain number of the animals that she owned to be killed by hunters, provided that their numbers were within the limits of population sustainability. However, the killing of her special (pet) animals was taboo. Her special animals were traditionally marked in some way:

a white colour, a white mark on the forehead, an unusually large size, golden horns or a shining horn, intertwined or twisted horns, a single horn, or a dappled or multi-coloured skin (Virsaladze 1976, 33).

Let us turn aside for a moment from pictorial representations of the owner of the animals and discuss what is known of the hunting culture and myths in the Caucasus.

### *Hunting Myths in the Caucasus*

One of the problems of trying to study the development of hunting mythology in Europe is that economic conditions in Europe have changed to such an extent, and over such a long period of time, that hunting mythology has been forgotten. Conversely, in places where hunting is still economically important, such as in parts of Africa and South America, the environment is often so different that it is dangerous to try and draw comparisons. The Caucasus, however, is in a unique position. In the heart of the Caucasus, within the small region of Georgia, and some other regions of the Caucasus, live people who have developed from closely related tribes, and who speak the same or closely related languages, and whose underlying culture is therefore also closely related.

Although the culture of the valley cities is similar to that of other European cities, there are remote mountain villages where hunting was, until very recently, one of the chief economic pursuits. The result of this huge variation among closely related peoples within a small region is that it is often possible to

trace the development of any given strand of folk culture. Scattered remains of ancient folk culture may be found in other parts of Europe, but they are often only preserved accidentally in published literature, and therefore it is often very difficult to place them in a relevant context. In the Caucasus, however, there is much more information available that allows one not only to place remnants of folk literature in context, but also to study their development and decay. In this sense, the Caucasus is a kind of "museum of cultural development."

Some Georgian hunting concepts are extremely ancient, although in the absence of written material it is nearly impossible to give even approximate dates. Probably the safest way to obtain an estimate of their age is by archaeological studies, which have found remains of weapons, animal bones and so on, from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages (Melikishvili 1959, 145–53). Another indication of their age is the inclusion of *veshaps* as participants in some of the hunting stories; *veshaps*, which can be observed throughout Southern Georgia and Armenia as gigantic stone stelae in the form of fishes, have been dated at between the fifth and first millennium B.C. (Marr and Smirnov 1931). Yet a further indication of age is that, in the mountain region of Svaneti, the hunting goddess Dali (of whom, more later) is said to have had a son, Amirani, one of the many Prometheus figures in the Caucasus. A. Gadagatl, who has studied Caucasus versions of the Prometheus story, concludes that they probably predated the better-known Greek version (Gadagatl 1997, 182 and 188). Again, A. Robakidze, who dedicated a specialist monograph to the survivals of a collective hunt in Georgia, considered that;

The historical materials bear witness that in the first century B.C., in the mountainous strip of Georgia, there lived a whole series of tribes whose basic source of existence was game and wild fruiting plants, in distinction from the plain, where there is evidence of settled agriculture (quoted in Virsaladze 1976, 22).

A very detailed analysis of hunting mythology in the Caucasus has been made by the eminent Georgian folklorist, Elena Virsaladze. Much information from this book has been summarised by Anna Chaudhri, who also introduced similar elements from Ossetian hunting lore (Chaudhri 1996, 166–7). Most of the information presented here about hunting mythology in the Caucasus has been taken from Virsaladze's book unless otherwise stated. Although the information is mainly from Georgia, there is evidence of similar traditions in other parts of the Caucasus, as noted by Chaudhri (1996, 72–6).

Hunting has traditionally been an important means of subsistence in the Caucasus Mountain region. In hunting there are two elements of chance that operate. First, there are the related questions of whether the hunter will manage to find prey, whether he will succeed in killing it and be able to retrieve it and bring it home. Second, there is the danger of working in the high crags, the home of the mountain goats and the *turs*. The slain animal might fall into a dangerous place and so be difficult to retrieve; and a wounded animal, when struggling, might put the hunter in danger of falling to his death. If hunting with a bow and arrows, the hunter would also want to recover his valuable arrow, which may have fallen in a dangerous place. Thus, the two elements of chance are: hunting success, and the risk of injury or death.

In some cultures there is no such thing as an "accident:" a human or superhuman agent must be in operation. So the hunting myths and legends explain both of these chance effects by the relationship between superhuman agents (gods and goddesses) and the human hunter. Although hunting success could be partly ascribed to experience, it could also be attributed to special favours from the goddess or mistress of the beasts, often because of a love relationship. Conversely, any diminution in the hunter's success might be because the animals had been over-hunted, but it might also be because the goddess had become angry with the hunter who had been unfaithful to her. If he had an accident and was killed, the goddess might have arranged for him to be pushed over the cliff because he had opposed her will in some way. The supernatural explanations might not be the hunter's own but, for one reason or another, he cannot speak of the reasons for his success or failure—the only people who did speak about it were those who composed the story afterwards.

The songs and traditions indicate that a matriarchal religion was gradually replaced by a patriarchal one, and the function of the goddess was slowly usurped by a male figure, sometimes her son, brother, father or husband (Virsaladze 1976, 38). When Christianity took the place of paganism, the new church found it ineffectual to use force to replace the pagan beliefs so, as in Western Europe, the church authorities decided to overlay the pagan cults with Christian beliefs, names and rituals. The Church even took over the traditional prayers of the hunters for a successful and safe hunt, prayers that were spoken before setting out hunting. At this stage, the cult of the goddess was replaced by the cult of St George, who still favoured certain hunters according to their assiduousness in lighting candles, offering sacrifices, and so on. This represented a change in the relationship between the hunter and the owner of the animals. Instead of the goddess giving prey according to her personal whim, St George was expected to provide the prey so long as the hunter said his prayers and offered the appropriate sacrifices. In order to discredit the goddess, the traditions gradually changed her into an evil and ugly woodland spirit, an *ali*, who frightened the solitary traveller. And her specially favoured animals, the deer, the *tur* or the wild goat, into whose form she sometimes changed herself, could be used by the Christian iconographers to represent Satan himself.

So how has the ancient material been preserved, in a society where literacy is by no means universal? The village communities in the mountains have a tradition of the *khovod* (Russian) or the *perkhuli* (Georgian); namely, the round dance. These are performed regularly, often at annual festivals. The performers sing and dance, sometimes to the accompaniment of an instrument, the singing usually involving a leader and chorus, or sometimes more than one of each. By their regular performance, the words are remembered from one generation to the next, and they convey beliefs and ideas from the distant past. The texts of the songs and the traditions have been recorded by various folklorists during expeditions to the mountain areas.

### *Relevant Songs and Traditions of Hunting in Georgia*

The goddess was generally called "the lady of the beasts," "the mistress of the beasts," "the sovereign of the beasts," and so on. She had various names in

different regions. For instance, in the high-mountain region of Svaneti (Western Georgia) where, because of its remoteness, the most primitive versions of the traditions remain, she was called "Dali" and often addressed as "Dali of the Crag." Here her favourite animal was usually the *tur*. In Samegrelo (Western Georgia) she was "Tkashi-Mapa" and "Queen of the forest." Here her animal was usually the deer. She owned the wild animals, both prey and predators, and looked after them. However, she allowed the hunters to kill them, provided that they observed the necessary taboos. A hunter could only kill an animal by her permission. Before going hunting, the hunter refrained from relations with a woman for a specified period, in order to avoid incurring the jealousy of the goddess. As food he would take with him specially baked small loaves of bread. He would start off early in the morning, because Dali was also personified in the Morning Star.

If a hunter observes all the required customs in the home, he must get going on his way before the pre-dawn star rises, in other words he must climb up to the hunting places before the animal (*tur* or chamois) goes out to graze. And here he must perform the following: kindle a fire, pour some hot coals on a small stone and, as soon as the pre-dawn star begins twinkling, to break a wax candle in pieces, throw them on the coals and say the prayer:

"Glory to you, star of the dawn!

Glory to Dali, glory to Afsaty. [3]

Help me today, let me kill an animal. Glory to you!" (Virsaladze 1976, 301).

He would say a prayer to her for a successful and safe hunt.

Glory to my gracious God! Whenever I appeal to you with a request, have pity on me, Dali of the crags, glory to you! Afsati of the crags, glory! You are in charge of a wild animal: when I come into your domains, bring me back home in peace; give me a share in the animal, do not begrudge a large one, do not be ashamed of a small one. In the autumn get me and my companions back home in peace. Whatever suits you, accept from me with my prayer, if there is nothing from me, then simply do not be offended at me for it. I am yours, you ought to pity and sympathise with me. Give me good success, adding favour to favour. Outside and at home, everywhere, hear my entreaties, do not deprive me of your mercy ... (ibid., 301).

The goddess was always ready to enter into love relations with hunters, as a result of which the hunter would become extraordinarily successful in hunting. But sooner or later the hunter would betray the goddess with another woman, take too many of her beloved animals, or anger her in some other way. Then woe betide the hunter, his doom was inevitable and swift.

A typical example is in the round-dance song, "Dali gives birth in the crags." (Dali gives birth to a baby among the crags, she drops the baby, and a wolf who is waiting below snatches up the baby and runs off with it. The hunter, Mepisa, sees it and shoots the wolf.)

He picked up Dali's baby.

He thrust the wolf skin under his belt.

In the crags Dali was wailing,

The crags were wailing even louder.

The hunter Mepisa approached,

He approached the foot of the white crag.

"My mother, let down your plait to me!"

"May a mother's blessing be with you,  
 I have nobody who would call me mother.  
 The one who called me mother, a beast has taken from me!"  
 "I am your child!"  
 "Who was your rescuer, then?"  
 "My rescuer was the hunter Mepisa."  
 "I will offer him the choice of three things:  
 If he wants it, every day  
 We will give him a mountain goat;  
 Or else, then in September  
 We will make a present of nine *turs*,  
 Or else, then he will lie with me."  
 "I do not dare to share your bed,  
 Make me a present of nine *turs*!"  
 She brought out the nine *turs* for him,  
 A golden-horned one she joined to them.  
 The hunter took aim at the golden-horned one,  
 That same one deflected the bullet,  
 And sent it back at the hunter's forehead.  
 The hunter Mepisa she laid out on the ground! (ibid., 228).

Although the hunter was allowed to kill the animals of the mistress of the beasts, provided that he did not kill too many of them, there were certain special animals that he must not shoot at. These were "marked" animals: animals of an unusual colour or markings, extra large animals (possibly the leader of the herd), animals with golden horns or antlers, or with only one horn, as in a tradition headed "The Mistress of the Beasts."

A Jijeti hunter from Tianeti went to hunt one day in a forest in Sviani. On the slope of a mountain pass he killed two bears, after which he crossed into Sviani and saw two deer lying there. One of them was one-horned. The other had a pair of horns. In haste the hunter fired at the single-horned one. That deer happened to be the property of the mistress of the animals.

Immediately the mistress exclaimed, "The one-horned has been killed! He was tired, he had only just come from the threshing floor. Let the progeny of the murderer not exceed one!" And right away the hunter saw the mistress of the beasts ...

The hunter ran from there in fear. He came home, and what was there? His eldest son was dead, the middle son died after his father's arrival, the third one died during the burial of his brothers. There remained the very youngest, the fourth one. From that time it went like that—only one son survives in their family (ibid., 278–9).

In the high mountains, where there are large falls of snow, there can also be avalanches. Sometimes these were used by the goddess to punish those who killed one of her "marked" *turs* or goats.

Dali happened to be living in the crags, in Nakvderi. A town was there formerly. A smithy was there too. They used to hammer gold there. They say that when they used to hammer gold, there was a mineral spring there at the time. The wild animals used to gather all around it. When they went there, to the spring, it used to be full of *turs* there.

One day the hunter Orsulan went off hunting. Dali was in the forest. Orsulan took his dog and wounded a marked *tur*. Dali became angry at this, she sent snow and overwhelmed the

town. Since that time the snow there has not even thawed. It thaws from below, but is laid down from above (ibid., 302).

Since the goddess controlled both the prey and the predator animals, in other cases she sent her snow leopard, with his eyes “full of god’s anger,” to take revenge for the killing of her special animals, as in the very popular “The young man and the snow leopard” (ibid., 309). In other cases, the animals themselves attacked the hunter, either by pushing him over a cliff or by taking him over the edge with them. In the widely spread ancient ballad, “There is snow over Upper Batsaligo,” Kvirika Kurdgelashvili is dying, and he is reminded of a previous warning that the animals would actually attack him.

Do not go after the mountain *turs*,  
Kvirika Kurdgelashvili!  
The *turs* will lure you with deception,  
They will smash you against the points of the crags.  
They will let loose the evil one on you in the heights,  
They will cover you with newly-fallen snow,  
Do not sacrifice your gun in the Tania,  
It has killed quite a few *turs* ...  
At first our enemies will rejoice,  
And then the *turs* of the Padukhi Crags! (ibid., 317).

The mistress of the beasts not only herds her animals, but she can also take the form of one, as the following tradition of the hunter Gakhuta shows (Gakhuta has shot a wolf that was creeping up on a flock of *turs*):

He was thinking that he would have scared off the *turs*, but the *turs* did not run away. Suddenly he saw standing in front of them a young woman with a shepherd’s stick in her hands, and she was pasturing the *turs*. The woman went up to Gakhuta and said, “Since you have saved the *turs* from the wolf, kill a *tur* as a reward.” She had only just said it, when both the *turs* and that woman vanished. Saddened, Gakhuta hoisted the wolf’s carcass on to his shoulders and went off home. When he had gone down into the forest he sat down by a spring and began dressing the wolf. He looked at the tops of the crags and saw some *turs* walking along the crest. He fired at the very sturdiest and brought it down from the crest of the crags. He dragged the *tur* to the spring and carried on dressing the wolf’s carcass. The hunter looked round and saw that the *tur* was not in its place.

He glanced at the crag and saw standing there that woman who was tending the *turs*. That woman said to him, “I actually told you to kill a *tur*, but you fired at me.” That *tur*, as it turned out, was really that woman. Gakhuta had three sons, and after he returned from the hunting, all three died within three months. And he himself began to be ill, and before his death he told this story (ibid., 233).

### Discussion and Conclusions

The information presented is intended to suggest an interpretation of the mysterious figures in the tapestries of “The Lady and the Unicorn” (Figure 6) other than the more familiar Christian one, and of the origins of the unicorn itself. Inevitably, it also raises new questions. For example, how widely were hunting myths like these spread throughout Europe? Some remnants still exist, but are very attenuated. The decay of these myths and ideas in Europe is partly

the result of the extinction of the wild animals and the changes in the economy over the millennia—hunting is no longer an economic activity—but it is also partly the result of the active antagonism of the Christian Church, which deliberately overlaid the original symbols with a new interpretation. Fortunately, much more robust remnants have survived in the museum-like environment of the Caucasus Mountains, on the edge of Christian Europe, where these two causes for the decay of the myths have had weaker effects.

Besides the general evidence already presented, there are two coincidences that must be considered as remarkable. First, there is the story of the Christian saints Barlaam and Josaphat (Voragine 1993, 2:355–66). This tells of “a man fleeing in haste from a unicorn who threatened to devour him. He fell into an abyss (or well) but succeeded in grabbing hold of a bush, although he could not get a proper foothold.” As well as the ferocious unicorn staring down at him from the edge, there are various other animals threatening him: a dragon, snakes, and two mice that gnaw at the roots of the tree. In one version, the episode is witnessed by an Emperor of Rome who was hunting in the forest. In this version, “some hope is offered [to the man hanging on the tree] in the form of a friend with a ladder ... but in all cases the offer is ignored” (Scriptorium 1977, 85–8). Both of these episodes occur in a number of the round-dance songs of Georgia. An example of falling into the abyss is given in the following round-dance song.

“Dawn arise, would that you did not arise,  
 You long autumn night.  
 Rise up, would that you did not rise up,  
 You pre-dawn star.  
 Start crying, would that you did not cry at all,  
 You only son of your mother,  
 Dog, go down and bark,  
 O your master’s Kursha.  
 Your master is hanging on the crag,  
 On a lace from the skin of a barren cow.  
 They will shoot, they will dislodge it  
 With the sworn-brother’s arrow.”

Thus the mother learned of the death of her son (Virsaladze 1976, 277).

In this, and other versions of the song, the hunter has fallen, but his fall was interrupted by a lace of his boot catching on a projection, from which he was hanging all night. Kursha is a marvellous mythical hunting dog who had been hatched from an egg laid by a raven or an eagle, and the pre-dawn star is associated with the goddess, Dali, as stated earlier.

There is another similarity that must be considered as a pure coincidence, but nevertheless is strange. For example, in several of the recorded Caucasus round-dance songs, the goddess is angry with the hunter for betraying her to a mortal woman by giving away her own special love-gift to the mortal. In only four songs is the gift specified: as “beads” (ibid., 234), as “a necklace” (ibid., 240), as “a necklace of amber beads” (ibid., 253) and as “a ring” (ibid., 254). Of course, it is a necklace that the lady in the tapestry is handling when she says “à mon seul désir,” as depicted in Figure 6.

The association of the unicorn with the ibex is not new. The Assistant Curator

of the museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, London, when asked what their sample of medicinal “unicorn horn” was made of, replied that it was the horn of either ibex or narwhal. Traditionally, the unicorn’s horn was supposed to resist disease, and particularly to act as an antidote to poison, and this feature was included in the set of “Lady and the Unicorn” tapestries in New York. This is also in accord with beliefs concerning a white ibex or deer in the Caucasus Mountains, although these concern the animal’s meat or milk rather than its horn. Such beliefs are epitomised in the traditional ballad of “Biyneger,” found in the high mountain region of Balkaria. The hunter Biyneger is pursuing a “golden-horned white doe,” in order to obtain her milk to cure his brother of “dog’s disease” (either leprosy or skin cancer). In fact, the white animal is really the hunting god’s daughter Baydimat in disguise, who is leading him into the mountains in order to punish him for wounding the god’s special *tur*. When she finally lets him catch up with her, high on Mount Elbrus, he says:

My brother Omar is confined to his bed,  
Without the milk of a white doe he will not live.  
If you are a (male) deer, let me send an arrow at you,  
But if you are a doe in milk, allow me to milk you.

The compiler’s footnote states that “the belief existed among the ancient Balkars and Karachays that the meat of a white deer cures all illnesses” (Khajieva 2001).

The evidence is only circumstantial and sparse, but I am suggesting that the origin of the unicorn could be the mountain goat, or the ibex as exemplified by the Caucasian *tur*, and that the figures of the lady with the “lion” and the unicorn could be at the core of ancient hunting mythology. One of the difficulties in developing this theme is that the literary evidence has been preserved in the Caucasus Mountains, but was only in an oral form until the collecting expeditions of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, little evidence has been preserved in other parts of Europe. However, I feel that the material presented in this paper could shed light on the origin of the unicorn tradition, and ought to be considered seriously by those studying the unicorn in general, and the figures in the tapestries of “The Lady and the Unicorn” in particular.

### Notes

- [1] M. Khidasheli, private communication, 2000.
- [2] But even the passive virgin is not entirely incompatible with the lady in hunting mythology. First, because the traditional hunting goddess, in spite of her relationships with hunters, was a “perpetual virgin” in the sense that each relationship is described as if it was the original one. Second, because in either form she had to agree to co-operate with the hunter: on the one hand by passively posing as bait, or on the other hand by actively providing the prey animal for the hunter. In either case, without her co-operation, the hunter could not succeed.
- [3] Nowadays they mention Saint George.

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### **Biographical Note**

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